

Che Guevara 'legend' is high-glossed by Hollywood's dream factory experts

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Of The Journal

Che! (Paramount)

It's all very well for Hollywood to glorify America's "folk heroes." Dan'l Boone, Al Capone, Billy The Kid and lately Clyde Barrow have all had the treatment.

Some of it has been good cinema, some of it just dream factory nonsense.

But what's all this about taking up the cause of an alien patriot? Revolutionary, hero, bandit, whatever, Che Guevara was an Argentinian who fought the cause of Castro's Cuba, and then died mysteriously while trying to advance his own in Bolivia. How does he qualify for a high, wide and handsome (and sympathetic too) Hollywood-type epic?

Actually he doesn't. But with the gall that usually attends these intended box office bonanzas someone decided that Egyptian Omar Sharif would make a grand Cuban revolutionary, and that all-American Jack Palance (World War II, Korea, et al) would be just right for Fidel Castro. So the two of them are lumped together in a lump of a film titled Che!, now at the Paramount.

And a high, wide and handsome-type Hollywood epic is just what director Richard Fleischer has aimed at. And got. And more's the pity for that.

NOT SHARIF!

In the first place how on earth could Omar Sharif of the liquid eyes and the quivering bottom lip effectively play so murderous and volatile a character as Che? Patriot, bandit, perhaps psychopath, the man was driven along by a lust for something they all like to call social justice, might have been instead merely the need for personal power.

But enough of that because I really don't know enough about the real Guevara to comment on his psychological motives. And obviously neither did director Fleischer and writers Michael Wilson and Sy Bartlett. The film does nothing to fill in the mystery. It just wanders blithely along following Sharif in beard and grime makeup as he sketches out a character that has all the paper mache earmarks of Misunderstood Hero clearly indulged into every twitch.

Che, so it goes, was an un-presumptuous medical man involved in Castro's initial landing in Cuba. But a couple of brutal battles later he's suddenly one of Fidel's trusted associates, a column leader and a dangerous war-mongering martinet.

As it transpires he is actually the brains behind the whole Cuban thing. Fidel is a myopic, tipling idiot just smart enough to realize that Guevara knows it all. But he puts his foot down when his talented lieutenant perpetrates the whole Russia-Cuba missile crisis thing with JFK and almost masterminds them all into a nuclear holocaust.

Right after that Che becomes disenchanted with his leader, and with Cuba. So off he goes to Bolivia to extend the insurrection. His idea is to inflame the whole of Latin America against the Damn Imperialist Yankees.

It doesn't work out that way, the film says, because someone (NOT the CIA, the narrator insists) finally cornered old Che and plugged him good. And there is the bullet-ridden body laid out to prove that he really did succumb, mysteriously or otherwise.

So much for the fact or fiction, or aggregation of both, the truths of the matter Sharif's hi-gloss Che doesn't even begin to bring any of it out.

And a dull and involved pseudo-documentary method of flashback snippets by people supposedly on the scene (Woody Strode was one of Che's boys, for goodness sake!) slows the film down very badly.

But the piece de resistance of all this shameful Hollywoodese is not Sharif's sensitive, tearful Che, or the matter-of-fact manner in which those various characters pop in front of the camera to confidentially reveal all. By being surely the most ridiculous facsimile of Castro imaginable old Jekyll and Hyde Palance is the clincher.

YOKEL PARODY

It doesn't matter what Castro is really like, or even if he is like this ludicrous parody of a yokel buffoon suddenly miscast in the role of saviour and nation-builder.

Palance, whether he is peering shortsightedly out from behind spectacles, or guzzling booze, or masticating a cigar, is the epitome of the over-blown but empty nonsense that Hollywood constantly passes off for epic adventuring.

Jack with a Thompson sub-machine gun is just great. But with a slice of history in those ham hands he just doesn't know what to do next.

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Source: Che!

CIA - Bolivia

Guevara, Ernesto (Che)